DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 440 454 EA 030 365

TITLE	Class Size Reduction: Great Hopes, Great Challenges. Policy Brief.
INSTITUTION	WestEd, San Francisco, CA.
SPONS AGENCY	Department of Education, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1999-01-00
NOTE	3p.
CONTRACT	RJ96006901
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Class Size; Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; Government School Relationship; Program Development; Small Classes; *Teacher Student Ratio
IDENTIFIERS	*Class Size Reduction

ABSTRACT

This policy brief examines the benefits and the challenges that accompany class-size reduction (CSR). It suggests that when designing CSR programs, states should carefully assess specific circumstances in their schools as they adopt or modify CSR efforts to avoid the unintended consequences that some programs have experienced. Some of the challenges include the teaching supply and teacher quality, inadequate facilities, and a worsening of inequities. However, CSR also can provide many benefits, such as achievement gains, especially for poor and minority students; greater individual attention, the improved identification of special needs, and fewer discipline problems; faster and more indepth coverage of content; greater teacher-parent contact and parent satisfaction; and reduced classroom stress and greater enjoyment of teaching. Research shows that children in the primary grades--especially poor and minority children--benefit most from smaller classes. Schools will need to hire many new teachers, and these newest educators will require mentorship and training programs. Facility support will also need to be examined, along with plans to implement flexible funding. Finally, CSR programs should build in evaluation and research components that focus on unanswered questions. (RJM)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

WestEd

POLICY BRIEF

JANUARY 1999

ED 440 454

class size reduction

great HOPES, GREAT challenges

Numerous states have enacted or are considering measures to reduce class size. Additionally, as part of a seven-year program to ensure an average class size of 18 for grades one through three, the federal government has committed more than $2.5 billion to a national class size reduction (CSR) initiative. These efforts stem from research findings on CSR's achievement benefits, as well as from its enormous popularity with parents, administrators, and teachers.

HOWEVER, not all efforts have proven equally successful. In designing CSR programs, careful assessment of specific state circumstances should help states adopting or modifying CSR efforts avoid the unintended consequences that some programs have experienced and ensure greatest benefit from what is usually a considerable financial investment.

BENEFITS

Research in the primary grades shows that as class size shrinks, opportunities grow. Successful implementation of CSR has led to numerous benefits, which appear to last into the high school years, including:

- Achievement gains, especially for poor and minority students.

  Greater individual attention and teacher knowledge of each student's progress.

  Improved identification of special needs, allowing earlier intervention and less need later for remediation.

  Fewer classroom discipline disruptions.

  Faster and more in-depth coverage of content; more student-centered classroom strategies, such as special-interest learning centers; more enrichment activities.

- Greater teacher-parent contact and parent satisfaction.

- Reduced classroom stress and greater enjoyment of teaching.

CHALLENGES

Challenges for policy design arise in three major areas:

Teaching supply and teacher quality

A fundamental condition for the success of CSR is good teaching. CSR can exacerbate teaching shortages and lead to the hiring of underqualified teachers. In California, for example, since the implementation of the state's CSR program, the percentage of teachers without full credentials has jumped from 1% to over 12%, while the proportion of teachers with three or fewer years of experience rose by 9% and the proportion of teachers who had "the least education, a bachelor's or no degree, increased by nearly 6% statewide.

Facilities

Inadequate facilities can impede schools' ability to implement CSR and/or compromise CSR's benefits. Whole schools or programs may also suffer if, for example, libraries, music rooms, special education rooms, or computer rooms are converted into classrooms, as has happened in some places. Many space-strapped schools have combined two "smaller" classes into one large one with two teachers. Wisconsin reports positive results from such team teaching; in Nevada, however, concern exists that team teaching has compromised CSR's success.

Equity

CSR policies can inadvertently worsen inequities. In California, for example, a one-size-fits-all allotment per student and a rigid 20:1 cap on class size led to uneven implementation. Early evaluation findings support the concern that the very students who

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 430 365

Improving education through research, development, and service

CHALLENGES *continued*

stand to benefit most from CSR — poor and minority students — are least likely to have full opportunity to do so. Schools serving high concentrations of low-income, minority, and English language learner (ELL) students implemented more slowly due to lack of facilities. These same schools have the hardest time attracting prepared, experienced teachers and, thus, suffered a far greater decline in teacher qualifications than other schools. Finally, for many of these schools, the cost of creating smaller classes exceeded their CSR revenues, and to make up the deficit they diverted resources from other activities.

Visit our Web site at WestEd.org; call 415/565-3000; or write: WestEd, 730 Harrison Street, San Francisco, CA 94107-1242.

This publication was produced in whole or part with funds from the U.S. Department of Education, under contract #RJ96006901.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Crafting a successful CSR program is no simple matter. As knowledge from state and local experience continues to evolve, lessons are emerging that suggest important design elements for policymakers to consider, including:

Targeting

Since research shows that children in the primary grades and, especially, poor and minority children benefit most from smaller classes, it makes sense to direct CSR monies toward these children. Such targeting can also offset some of the difficulties inner-city and poor, rural schools face in attracting well qualified teachers and finding sufficient classroom space.

Teacher support

Schools will need to hire a number of new and, possibly, inexperienced teachers to enact CSR policies. If the teachers are unprepared, resources for support, such as mentorship and training programs, will need to be considered. Research, experience, and a policy climate of higher expectations also suggest that novices and veterans alike will need support to learn new teaching strategies that capitalize on the opportunities smaller classes present.

Facility support

CSR initiatives require adequate facilities. If facility issues are not attended to at all levels, expensive investments in smaller classes are likely to be compromised.

Flexibility

CSR policies that allow flexibility in the use of funds help keep the focus on improving learning, teaching, and student achievement. In exchange for accountability, policymakers may consider options that allow schools and districts latitude to tailor decisions to the needs of their own circumstances and students — for example, allowing a class-size average rather than mandating a cap or encouraging creative scheduling.

Program evaluation

CSR programs should build in evaluation and research components, particularly focused on unanswered questions, such as the outcomes of creative approaches to CSR.

RESOURCES

The following resources offer further detailed information on CSR, as well as links to additional sites and references:

- WestEd Class Size Policy Web Site < WestEd.org/policy/hot_top/csr/ht_hm_csr.htm >
- California's CSR Research Consortium < classize.org >
- U.S. Department of Education Class Size Web Site < ed.gov/offices/OESE/ClassSize >
- Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) Web Site < uwm.edu/SOE/centers&projects/sage/ >
- Project Student Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) Web Site < telalink.net/~heros/star.htm >
- Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis: Special Issue — Class Size: Issues and New Findings, Summer 1999, Vol. 21, No. 2, Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association

© WestEd 2000. Permission to copy with attribution to WestEd is hereby granted.